

**Meetings (1): Getting down to business**

**Topic:** Meetings and getting down to business

**Aims:**

- To discuss the importance and drawbacks of small talk at meetings;
- To teach some useful phrases for small talk;
- To teach some useful phrases for starting a meeting;
- To provide practice and feedback of the situation of starting a meeting.

**Level:** Intermediate (B2) and above

**Introduction**

The beginning of a meeting presents a major dilemma: is it better to get straight down to business, or is it important to allow or even encourage small talk? The texts in this lesson present arguments from opposing viewpoints, which may help students to question their own assumptions. The lesson goes on to introduce useful language for both small talk and getting down to business, with practice in the form of role-plays.

**1. Lead-in**

Elicit from the class a definition of 'small talk'.

**Suggested answer**

Small talk refers to conversations about things which are not directly relevant to the current task we are doing or the situation we are in. Classic examples include discussions at work about the weather, the news, TV programmes, family news, etc. Small talk is small in the sense that the conversations tend to be quite short.

Then divide the class into two teams. (If you have a large class, you may want to split the teams, e.g. four teams of four, rather than two teams of eight.)

One team should come up with arguments in favour of allowing or encouraging small talk in business meetings; the other team should come up with arguments in favour of discouraging preventing small talk in meetings. Make sure they write down their arguments, e.g. on flipcharts, which will be useful for the reading exercise later.

After about five minutes, ask for a volunteer to chair a meeting between the two teams to present and discuss their arguments and to decide on the best approach to managing small talk in meetings. Allow plenty of time (around 10–15 minutes) for the meeting.

At the end, give and elicit feedback on the effectiveness of the meeting itself, e.g. how well did the chair manage to control the meeting or encourage creativity and compromise, did everyone contribute equally, or was the meeting dominated by the most confident speakers, etc.

**2. Reading**

Students work in pairs to read the texts in order to see which points from the lead-in discussion they mention. One student in each pair should read the first text (Let's stop wasting time and get on with it!); the other should read the second text (Small talk is the cement that holds businesses together). If you have an odd number of students, you will need to have a group of three, where two students read the first text.

When they have finished reading, they take turns to summarise their texts to their partners, focusing especially on similarities and differences from their own lead-in discussions.

Finally, discuss the two texts with the class, paying attention to difficult or important vocabulary (e.g. *an attendee, to tick away, to appreciate sth, an excuse, to turn up, to fail to do sth, to stick to sth, to hijack sth, (ir)relevant, to take over sth, concrete, to implement a decision, vital, to trust sb, to persuade sb to do sth, an interruption, a queue, a watercooler, systematic, to flourish, to get sth straight, a misunderstanding, rigidly, appropriate, to tolerate sth*).

### Background notes

- Note that the texts present rather extreme views, which are designed to generate further discussion rather than be taken as ideal advice.
- The Meeting Cost Clock really exists. See <http://www.effectivemeetings.com/diversions/meetingclock.asp> for an example.
- The 50% figure in the second text is taken from this blog post (<http://englishfortheworkplace.blogspot.com/2010/08/small-talk-or-business-talk.html>). I have been unable to trace the original research that it comes from.

### 3. Small talk phrases (1): questions

Students work in pairs to complete the questions by putting the verbs in the best form. When you discuss the answers together, focus on the patterns (e.g. use present continuous to ask about current projects). Elicit more questions for each small talk topic, as well as other suitable topics for small talk.

### Suggested answers

1 are / working 2 is / going 3 Are / making (or: Have / made) 4 did / go 5 was / did / get 7 Have / heard (or: Did / hear) 8 have / been 9 will / sign (or: are / going to sign) 10 Are / going

### 4. Small talk phrases (2): answers

Students work in pairs to match the questions with the answers. When you check with the class, draw attention to the verb forms, which generally match the verb forms used in the questions. Elicit other suitable answers for each question, including the additional questions students generated in task 1. Finally, students test each other in pairs by reading one of the questions to elicit a suitable answer. Note that they will have a chance to be more creative in the practice activity below: the aim here is simply to practise the questions and answers from the worksheet.

### Answers

1h 2f 3a 4g 5d 6c 7j 8i 9e 10b

### 5. Small talk: practice

Students work in pairs to ask each other questions about their work or studies. If students know each other fairly well, they can ask fairly specific questions (e.g. their own versions of questions 2, 3, 4, 5, 7 and 9). If they don't know each other well, they can ask more general questions (e.g. questions 1, 6 and 8).

If you prefer, you could allow students to invent information about a fictitious job, in which case all eight questions would work.

Students should support each other to plan the best answer for the questions, i.e. they should spend some time deciding which tenses and vocabulary to use in their answers.

Afterwards, students swap partners and repeat the activity. This time, their answers should be much more fluent and natural, as they had time earlier to plan them.

### 6. Getting the meeting started (1): useful phrases

Students discuss the phrases in pairs and then share their ideas with the class. Note that some of the phrases are not especially difficult to understand, but it is still worth drawing attention to them as they are useful to use. Afterwards, you can check students have understood by reading one of the definitions below to elicit the correct phrase. Students could also test each other in this way in pairs.

#### Suggested answers

- make a start without them = start the meeting even though they aren't here
- a lot to get through = many things to deal with
- see where we are = assess our position / progress
- work out what we still need to do = calculate / plan our next actions
- tie up any remaining loose ends = resolve any remaining small problems
- sent round = distributed to everybody
- stick to the agenda = follow the agenda, avoid unscheduled discussions
- set aside = allocated
- run over = take longer than planned
- cover everything = discuss all the points
- get the ball rolling = start the meeting properly
- going through the list of action points = discussing the action points one by one
- look into = investigate
- came up = were mentioned
- found out = learned, discovered

### 7. Getting the meeting started (2): nine steps

Students work in pairs to match the steps to the descriptions. When you check with the class, elicit some other useful phrases for each step.

#### Answers

1c 2e 3h 4a 5i 6g 7f 8b 9d

### 8. Getting the meeting started (3): discussion

Students discuss the questions in small groups and then feed back to the class.

#### Suggested answers

1. She probably stood up or used another very visible signal to draw attention to herself. When she was interrupting the small talk, perhaps she held up a hand, palm outwards, like a policeman stopping traffic. She used eye contact to catch people's attention. She didn't finish her request (Could you ...?) because the other people should be able to work out what to do without being told explicitly (Could you please stop talking?).
2. Perhaps she was planning to speak to people individually later, rather than express criticism in public. Some of the attendees who were not late may find this irritating (Why should I be on time when other people are allowed to be late?), so perhaps she could have added that 'I'll have speak to them individually after the meeting'.
3. For example, if today is the 12<sup>th</sup> January, *the next month* is the period between now and the 12<sup>th</sup> February. *Next month* simply refer to some time in February.
4. With a short agenda, it may be best to go through it, but she did send it round and checked that everyone had seen it, so perhaps it was not necessary to go through it now.
5. Because meetings have a tendency to fill the available time. The ideal time limit was a way of keeping the meeting brief without being too inflexible.
6. Was/were going to. This verb form is sometimes called the future in the past. It is used for talking about past plans.
7. Possibly, especially if there were non-native English speakers there. For example, she could have said *allocated* instead of *set aside*, and *start* instead of *get the ball rolling*.

### 9. Getting the meeting started (4): matching

Students work alone to match the beginnings and endings, and then check in pairs before feeding back to the class. Students could also test each other in pairs by reading a beginning to elicit the ending from their partner.

#### Answers

1h 2e 3n 4m 5g 6k 7a 8f 9c 10b 11j 12d 13l 14i

### 10. Getting the meeting started (5): practice

Students work alone to decide what their meeting will be about and to plan how they will introduce their meetings. They then work in groups of 3–4 to take turns to get their meetings started. Monitor carefully, and give and elicit feedback at the end on the effectiveness of the meeting introductions.